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ABSTRACT

A teacher study group is a collaborative group organized by teachers to help them strengthen their professional development in areas of common interest. Groups provide an important structure for gaining autonomy and a major means for growing professionally while building communities of learners and providing avenues for self-actualization. This fastback looks at the foundations of the teacher study group concept, then explores four basic processes for developing effective teacher study groups. These processes are: (1) determining needs and purposes; (2) defining the group; (3) setting meeting procedures; and (4) documenting processes and outcomes. Suggestions for maintaining the momentum of study groups are provided, along with a summary of the four-stage cycle of the teacher group study process: goal identification, exploration, synthesis and application, and evaluation. Types of teacher study groups include: collaborative learning groups, administrators' study groups, computer-connected groups, teacher-initiated student study groups, and teacher study groups outside the school setting. Benefits of these groups as well as cautions and considerations are outlined. (Contains 22 references.) (ND)

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Teacher Study Groups for Professional Development

ED 406 371

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Teacher Study Groups for Professional Development

by
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and Cindy Wilson

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Introduction

A teacher study group is a collaborative group organized and sustained by teachers to help them strengthen their professional development in areas of common interest. In these groups, teachers remain in charge of their own independent learning but seek to reach personal goals through interaction with others. Groups focus on collaborative inquiries, such as researching a particular topic or issue, reading and discussing a specific book, investigating a theory, looking into a potential change in curriculum, or other commonly agreed purpose.

With professional development increasingly emphasized at all levels, teacher study groups provide an important structure for gaining autonomy and a major means for growing professionally while building communities of learners. In so doing, teacher study groups also provide avenues for self-actualization.

Most schools already have various groups in operation. Committees, task forces, and similar groups generally are appointed by administrators or others outside the group, who give the group its charge. Although

group members may function independently, the locus of control lies outside the membership of the group. Participants in such groups rightly see themselves as completing an agenda determined by someone else. They solve an assigned problem or perform a specific task. Once they have discharged their assignment, such groups usually disband unless they have been formed as standing committees.

By contrast, a teacher study group generally is originated by teachers choosing to collaborate in learning about a topic of common interest. The locus of control lies within the membership. Furthermore, efforts are made to meet the individual needs of members as well as to meet the collective goal of the group. This control manifests itself in two distinct but intertwined areas. First, members individually control their personal inquiries and explorations. Second, the group members together control the cooperative direction of their study.

In much of the professional literature, the terms "teacher support groups" and "teacher study groups" are used synonymously. However, we choose to distinguish them. A teacher study group differs from a teacher support group primarily in its focus. Teacher support groups focus mainly on affective matters with less emphasis on cognitive growth. Support groups are likely to be concerned with emotional growth and problem solving. On the other hand, a teacher study group is concerned primarily with cognitive growth. For example, one purpose central to many study groups is strengthening teaching practices through collaboration. However, affective support is likely to be a secondary

purpose or an additional outcome of a teacher study group.

Although a teacher study group may produce a report or a project, a tangible outcome may be secondary to the learning that the study environment produces. Teacher study group participants are "teachers as learners," who are empowered to take ownership of their learning. Group members bring to the study environment their own understandings and experiences, and in the group setting they attempt to explore new understandings and discover new resources. Therefore, the interpersonal infrastructure of the group is critical to both the group's and each member's successes. Members should feel a sense of equality and responsibility. Although degrees of involvement may vary from meeting to meeting, each participant shares in the quest for learning. Commitment to the group is voluntary and generally is sustained through intrinsic rewards.

The three authors of this fastback formed a teacher study group with the goal of researching the structures and uses of teacher study groups. Thus, as we describe the nature and benefits of teacher study groups, we also draw on our own firsthand experiences. Genny Cramer first heard about teacher study groups in a workshop given by K.M. Pierce in October 1992. After attending the conference, she began using teacher study groups in the graduate reading classes she was teaching at Southwest Missouri State University.

Beth Hurst explored teacher support groups in her doctoral coursework by conducting a pilot study and later started her own teacher study group. Cindy Wilson

incorporated the teacher study group process into a University of Arkansas team-teaching project that became the basis of her dissertation. She also conducted two electronic study groups through America Online and Netscape.

The typical teacher study group provides a helpful framework that ensures each member will have an opportunity to state individual needs as well as to develop a collaborative goal. Two additional results seem common to most study groups. First, most groups achieve a kind of synergy, wherein the group achieves more than any individual might achieve by working alone. Study groups generate energy.

Second, groups that continue to work together find that individual goals often become indistinguishable from group goals. Individual writing projects merge to become group projects, and the process of making thinking public enlarges ideas and expands resources.

Teacher study groups are a natural and effective means for teachers to have control in strengthening and directing their professional learning. The information in this fastback is intended to help teachers form study groups.

Foundations of the Teacher Study Group Concept

Many teachers today are rethinking traditional beliefs about how they teach and how students learn. Reutzel and Cooter contend that "because making transitions tends to be a grassroots movement, some teachers feel alone or isolated even in their own schools" (1992, p. 244). These writers believe that teachers need to meet and "share success stories with each other and help each other work through problems" (p. 244). According to Reutzel and Cooter, "to sustain the energy necessary to continue transitions, some teachers have begun to form small, informal study or support groups" (p. 244). The groups provide a means for teachers to "meet to discuss challenges, problems, and potential solutions" as well as provide a chance to give and receive encouragement (p. 244).

A number of writers and researchers have written about the nature and merits of teacher study groups. Unia found that her experiences in a "teachers' volun-

tary study group" helped her "sustain and further develop changes" she was trying to make in her classroom (1990, p. 131). Watson and Stevenson, who are active members of a support group for teachers of whole language, believe that "those involved in professional change need to receive encouragement, approval, advice, and sound information about their new professional adventure" (1989, p. 121). Brandt (1987) sees teacher support groups as contributing to school effectiveness through the use of positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual accountability, social skills, and group processing.

Routman saw a need in her school district for teachers who were undergoing transitions in their teaching to have time together to talk about what was going on in their classrooms and to "share issues and concerns and to support each other" (1991, p. 465). She formed support meetings as a form of "peer coaching" (p. 465). She stated that these meetings helped to strengthen each individual and made them more effective as teachers. (Readers may wish to review Fastback 371 *Peer Coaching in Teacher Education*, by Gloria A. Neubert and Lois Stover, for information related to this topic.)

Harste reported about schools in which "a network of teachers met regularly to study and share what they were doing and to gather ideas about what to do next" (1989, p. 41). He believed that "these networks were in a sense teacher support groups" (p. 41). Harste observed that teachers participating in the teacher support groups often were involved in inservice programs and workshops and sometimes were presenters at conferences. He

found that, professionally, these "experiences put them well ahead of their less active colleagues" (p. 42).

Teacher collaboration is an important component of teacher study groups, because it often is through interaction with others that teachers get new ideas and the encouragement to try new practices. Graves and Sunstein state that "as teachers tinker and share their tinkerings with other teachers, good practice will advance" (1992, p. 12). Newman has written about the importance of "engaging in dialogue with ourselves and other explorers" (1990, p. 24). Short, Giorgis, and Pritchard contend that "educators need to work with each other to think, analyze, and create conditions for change within their specific circumstances that relate to their personal or professional needs" (1993, p. 3). According to Bullough and Gitlin (1991), teachers need to be a community of learners supporting and sustaining each other's growth.

With these thoughts in mind, we can proceed to some of the reasons why teacher study groups are effective as a means of professional development. Most of the changes taking place in schools, at all levels, are occurring in individual classrooms at the instigation of individual teachers. Because teachers are at the heart of change and growth, it is imperative that they be actively involved in the change process by means of their own staff development programs. Tobin and LaMaster contend that "teachers should be involved in observing their own teaching, observing colleagues teach, reflecting on practice, and discussing, analyzing, and interpreting data from classrooms" (1992, p. 135).

However, Vacca and Vacca found that few inservice programs are aimed at teachers "attaining personal goals through collaboration" (1986, p. 384) and believe that more inservice programs should be focused on teachers' interests and needs. Too often, staff development programs are one-hour meetings in which a person from outside the school comes in and tells teachers about the changes they should begin making in their classrooms. Staff development in this form usually is centered on an isolated topic with little or no application or follow-up. Teachers are constrained to be passive consumers rather than active participants, and the locus of control is contained outside the group and the individual teachers. Short and colleagues (1993) state:

> The short-term inservices, conferences, and workshops currently offered do serve a function in exposing teachers and administrators to new perspectives, theories, and practices but they do not support the day-to-day living of schools and classrooms or allow educators to be active participants in their own growth. (p. 3)

Short and colleagues believe that active teacher involvement in and responsibility for their own learning is the major commitment of teacher study groups. They contend that until teachers learn how to create their own cooperative learning environments, they will have trouble creating such environments for the students in their classrooms. Changes occur in methodology and philosophy as teachers become empowered learners, researchers, and practitioners.

According to Watson and Stevenson, "teachers who are going through professional changes (whether the

changes are described as moderate or transforming) also are going through personal changes" (1989, p. 121). Gann and Friel similarly comment that "change is a highly personal experience for the individuals involved in the process" (1993, p. 296).

Because change is so personal, teachers need time to reflect on their beliefs and practices. Finding the time for teachers to collaborate is a problem. Murphy believes that if we want teachers to "retain a sense of their own scholarly development" (1993, p. 645), then they should be given time during the school day in which they can confer with their colleagues and learn from each other. One way in which schools could do this would be to provide time for teacher study groups as they traditionally do for staff development or by providing teachers with professional development credit. This type of attitudinal change on the part of school administrators also may support complementary pedagogical changes based on the outcomes of such teacher collaboration.

Harste believes that real change comes from a grassroots movement. In his study of effective schools, Harste found that each school usually had what he refers to as a "change agent" (1989, p. 44), or one person who is facilitating changes in the school. He found that "effective change agents began by working with one person in one classroom," and then these changes were observed by other teachers in the building until "schoolwide change seemed to occur rapidly" (p. 44). When teachers work in study groups, each individual takes on the change-agent role. Sanacore echoes this notion

when he comments that the "essence of a study group is that it is intrinsically designed in a grass-roots level way to promote the type of exploration that is specifically important to the group members" (1993, p. 2).

One study conducted by Keller (1995) gives further support to the importance of teachers interacting and being agents of change. In examining changes made at the Thomas Edison Elementary School in California, Keller found that "while the changes seem dramatic in retrospect, staff members are quick to point out that change has been neither sudden nor without resistance" (p. 11). Traditionally, decisions regarding school changes usually had come from the administrators "down" to the teachers, and the teachers usually worked in isolation. After a change in philosophy, the teachers began working together and observing each other teach. Excitement grew. They became eager to incorporate changes in their teaching beliefs and practices. Keller found that "the resulting collaboration and camaraderie created a more trusting and supportive environment" (p. 12). As schools create environments conducive to "risk-taking, experimentation, and collaboration," teaching and learning will be transformed (p. 13).

Indeed, Sizer states that schools will not get "significant, long-term reform" without "collaboration among teachers" (O'Neil 1995, p. 4). Teacher study groups can be a vital component of school improvement by offering a viable bridge from information sharing to practical application at the hands of empowered teachers. And as teachers learn and grow, the results can be seen in the classroom. Sadker and Sadker state that "when

teachers change, so do their students" (1994, p. 5). Teachers become excited about learning and make effective changes in their modes of instruction. Their energy spreads to their students and to other teachers.

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Developing Effective Teacher Study Groups

How study groups are initiated and sustained will vary according to the purpose of the group, its composition, and the needs of individual participants. However, certain basic processes tend to be common to most groups. We describe these processes as 1) determining needs and purposes, 2) defining the group, 3) setting meeting procedures, and 4) documenting processes and outcomes.

Determining Needs and Purposes. Teacher study groups are formed on the basis of individual and group needs or to fulfill other identified purposes. For example, teachers may need to address an issue raised by an administrator, a parent, a professor, a business person, or a consultant. While such an impetus may be viewed as "external," control over the formation and operation of the group should be "internal." That is, the teachers themselves should determine the specific needs to be addressed and how to approach the task.

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Several teachers may discover through informal conversations that they share a common interest in a particular subject, or they need to learn about a new curriculum or teaching unit that they will be introducing to students. A new computer or a new software program may raise a need to study the equipment or the program in order to use it effectively. Learning how to use a computer network is a group need that can be met in a teacher study group.

Shared interests in professional study also may give rise to the formation of a group. Teachers may decide to read and discuss a particular book or series of books. They even may extend a study-group experience by enrolling together in a university class for credit. Action research, testing new instructional approaches, piloting textbooks and supplementary materials, and other activities that involve several teachers in a common purpose are reasons for forming teacher study groups.

Defining the Group. Once a purpose or need has been identified, appropriate group size and membership can be defined. The size of a teacher study group will depend largely on the group's task and on the level of participation required of members. We suggest that a minimum of three active participants are needed to facilitate a workable group. Large groups seem to be less effective. If the group is too large, the participants may not have sufficient opportunities to participate actively. Murphy, who has examined the study-group process, states that "when forming study groups, we have found that groups of six or fewer individuals function best" (1992, p. 92).

During this defining stage, the group may allow members to invite other colleagues to join the group, or individual members may opt to disengage from the process. Opting out is a normal part of refining the match among members, which may not be a good fit for some teachers who initially considered participating.

Following are several group rules that should be considered because they can prevent later difficulties:

1. Group membership should be voluntary, and the group should allow a measure of flexibility in members' attendance.
2. Decisions about meeting times and places, notices, supplies, refreshments, and other logistics should be made by the entire group.
3. Each group member should be committed to active and consistent participation in the study group.
4. The group should develop and adhere to meeting procedures that facilitate civil discourse. (See the section on "Setting Meeting Procedures.")

Fishbaugh and Hecimovic (1994) experienced some pitfalls in teacher study groups that can be circumvented easily with appropriate planning. For example, they found that after-school meetings were too taxing for quality teacher support because teachers simply were too tired from teaching all day. Likewise, members of large groups and individuals with widely divergent personal agendas found it difficult to find common ground and to trust each other.

Teacher study groups that convene regularly and have specific agendas are most likely to flourish. In the case

of Fishbaugh and Hecimovic's work, the teachers at Garfield Elementary School found success meeting two Tuesdays each month from 7:30 until 8:20 in the morning before the students arrived.

The study group that we organized scheduled weekly 90-minute meetings. Sometimes we chose to extend the meeting time with the group's approval, or we agreed to meet twice in a given week to stay closer to our target goals and timetable. The important factor was consensus. Having a meeting time that works for all group members is very important. Indeed, the only real difficulty we encountered in our study group was matching meeting times to personal schedules. However, we also discovered that even when we met without all the members being present, the collaboration proved fruitful for those participants able to be present and diminished the possibility of losing the cooperative momentum.

Setting Meeting Procedures. According to Murphy, "Study groups provide a regular collaborative environment for teachers of varying backgrounds, knowledge, and skills" (1992, p. 71). The participants are at the core of their own learning but are supported and nurtured within the group. Pierce (1992) suggests that each meeting begin with all members, in turn, saying briefly what they each need during that particular meeting. This procedure ensures that everyone understands the needs of the members of the group and helps to focus the group's efforts so that those needs are met.

To further establish a necessary trust level, a teacher study group in which one of us participated asked its

members to share information about what they had been pursuing and what areas they still wanted to explore. In some groups more personal issues also are shared, though a teacher study group is intended only secondarily to be for social or emotional support.

Although such sharing is important, it should take place within a structured time so that everyone has a turn to speak and so that the meeting can then proceed to other matters. In the case of our study group, we structured those other matters by using a framework of four questions, which Genny Cramer had used with teacher study groups in her graduate reading classes.

1. What do we each need today?
2. What do we know now?
3. What do we want to know? What are the key questions that need to be asked when dealing with this subject?
4. Where do we go from here?

Although our study group no longer explicitly asks these four questions at each meeting, we keep them in mind; and we still rotate through the questions as needed. Based on these questions, we still begin each meeting with a discussion of our individual needs. We then move through group explorations of new materials and collaborations, and finally we return to identification of individual directions and goals for the next inquiry or exploration.

Through these collaborations the members sharpen their communication skills by articulating what they have learned, experienced, and predicted for future in-

vestigations. New issues often are raised and provide the motivation to pursue more substantive responses. As the original purposes for the study group begin to clarify and evolve, the group will tend to become more relaxed and accepting of the changes that occur in the group itself.

Sanacore believes that during the group meeting time, participants should share professional literature as well as practical experiences. He cautions that knowledge by itself does not offer guarantees of better teaching or problem solving; however, it will increase the potential for informed decision making. He refers to this process as the "transfer of learning" (1993, p. 9). As an example, the routine established in our study group centered on critiquing and sharing individual writings and discoveries at each session. Members were invited to express opinions and ask questions of each other's work from the previous week. From these discussions came reflections and changes, and finally a direction for the next area of concentrated study would emerge.

Closure for study group meetings can be achieved through the setting of goals for the next meeting. This element is critical to the progress of the teacher study group. Where the group is going is a decision that needs to be made by consensus, but independence also is important. An essential element in our teacher study group — one that we strongly recommend — is that members retain autonomy and choose their own tasks within the broad group goal.

An evaluation or review of the meeting may be in order for many group discussions, and this process also can

serve as closure. In our study group we found it necessary to designate a volunteer "secretary," who wrote down the minutes of the meeting, including each participant's personal goals for the next meeting, and distributed the minutes to use as a starting point for the next discussion.

Documenting Processes and Outcomes. Keeping a working history of the group's exploration is valuable for review, reference, clarification, direction, and ethnographic research. We discovered that providing group members with a written summary of each meeting intensified the review of previous information, triggered new ideas or connections between information, and provided a permanent record of work accomplished.

In our group, we took turns serving as secretary for three consecutive meetings so that one person did not have more responsibility than any other. The minutes, which were summarized and logged in a three-ring notebook for reference, included editorial comments by the secretary that emerged while transcribing the meeting notes. Each member also received copies of the summaries two days in advance of the next meeting.

Our group also found it helpful to exchange other information (such as articles, personal writings, or handout materials) two days ahead of the meeting. This method emerged for two specific reasons. First, the members found themselves tentative about what and when previous meetings had occurred as well as the specific content covered. Second, when materials were shared for the first time at a meeting, members focused on skimming and scanning the new information, rather

than on collaboration and discussion. These problems were avoided by ensuring that group members had information well ahead of the meetings.

Fishbaugh and Hecimovic (1994) found that their semi-monthly meetings were more successful when members:

> cite, collect, Xerox and distribute the articles for each month. At first, several selections were given to the teachers at each meeting to be reviewed for discussion at the next. This routine was overwhelming participants, so selections for each month are now distributed at the beginning of the month. Participants can now read articles of particular interest at their personal convenience. (p. 5)

Maintaining Momentum

What helps to sustain teacher study groups until their goals are reached? Maintaining the momentum of a study group is an important factor in reaching group and individual goals.

It is essential to remember that the teacher study group process requires patience. In general, teacher study groups do not achieve an immediate product. Indeed, study groups may falter or even disband and then redevelop with new zest. The key to keeping a study group intact and on target is commitment to the pursuit of professional growth by each member. And one great reward for the individuals may simply be the opportunity to work in a cooperative group with professional colleagues.

Teacher study groups often are based on cognitive learning. Discussions result in new avenues to explore and questions to be answered. Support from professional literature, leaders in the field, and current research helps group members to transfer new knowledge into classroom practice.

In essence, the study group members are "building their own knowledge base" as they tap into professional readings and experience (Short et al. 1993, p. 8). Murphy explained that "such settings enable teachers to help one another use new learning appropriately" (1992, p. 71). When such immediate results are obtained, they provide the stimulation for future group inquiries. And, perhaps most important, teachers are not left to flounder through the classroom implementation stage without support and feedback, as so often happens with changes in philosophy or practice.

Murphy further contends that "teachers should be actively collecting and analyzing the data from their own classrooms and schools. Action research conducted by groups of teachers is a powerful force for setting improvement targets and measuring student outcomes" (p. 72). From the teacher study group to the classroom and back to the teacher study group, the cycle therefore provides for continuous research and collaboration.

Murphy also identified another reward that results from the teacher study group process:

> [As] we get to know one another better as teachers and borrow from one another's storehouses of ideas and practices, we will become more cohesive as faculties and

> better able to work together to improve our schools. And, as individuals, we will be empowered by our new knowledge as we work with children and parents. (p. 72)

Short and colleagues also emphasize the importance of building a community of learners through teacher study groups and contend that this "helped to allay professional isolation, supported networking, and promoted sharing and dialogue among teachers" (p. 4). The community built in the study group:

> invited them to interact on a regular basis about issues of concern, gave them a chance to see how other people handled issues they were also dealing with, and often afforded them the window to see others were just as frustrated and concerned. (Short et al. 1993, p. 7)

We witnessed firsthand the synergy of our group, which increased as we became closer in our collaborations. Brainstorming became a meeting ritual, facilitating our understanding of the teacher study group process as we shared what we were doing.

Further documentation of this effect was provided by one study group whose participants kept response logs for reflection and documentation (Radencich 1993). Although some members were skeptical at first, many benefited from the log-keeping experience. According to Radencich, "in the spirit of Alice, who found things curiouser and curiouser as she went along, we have shared in the curiosity of our participants as we continue to explore the universe of our collective wisdom" (p. 175).

A Four-Stage Cycle

In summary, the teacher study group process can be described as a four-stage cycle:

Stage 1: Goal Identification. Individual participants determine their own goals for participating in the study group, and the group collectively determines group goals for a unified focus.

Stage 2: Exploration. Individuals seek out information, locate resources, and explore ideas. Part of the individual exploration is completed and extended by sharing information within the group, which becomes a form of group exploration.

Stage 3: Synthesis and Application. Individuals reflect on new knowledge and apply new understandings in their classroom practice. The group furthers this process through the sharing of experiences.

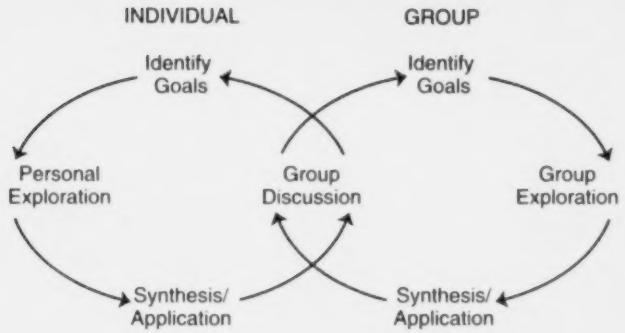
Stage 4: Evaluation. Individuals reflect on their experiences, assess whether their goals have been met, and set new goals. The group works through the same processes, and new goals lead to a new cycle.

This cycle includes both individual and group processes. Figure 1 illustrates these two separate processes rotating simultaneously and converging for the essential collaborative element of the teacher study group process.

Types of Teacher Study Groups

One of the advantages of implementing teacher study groups is that teachers actually can tie research to prac-

Figure 1. Wilson's Teacher Study Group Process Model



tice. Harste emphasizes that research is important to teachers, saying:

> The agenda ahead for educators is to develop a research methodology for the discipline of education. They must begin by not being afraid to acknowledge who they are, and by conducting and reporting real educational inquiries in real instructional settings. (1989, p. 7)

Various types of study groups can be structured for various purposes. While all teacher study groups share the general characteristics we have identified, one group may be very unlike another depending on the group's focus and membership. We have discovered several distinctions that begin to point to some types of groups, which we characterize as follows.

Collaborative learning groups. Teacher study groups initiated wholly by teachers and that are intended pri-

marily for teacher growth and professional sharing can be identified as collaborative learning groups. For example, a voluntary teacher study group was formed by several teachers at the Garfield Elementary School in Billings, Montana, to focus on teacher collaboration. Fishbaugh and Hecimovic (1994) reported that this group met over coffee and doughnuts before school two Tuesdays each month from 7:30 until 8:20.

Individual topics were explored at each session, and articles and research reviews were disseminated at the beginning of each month for the participants to peruse at their leisure. One result of this group was "that twelve teachers have consistently participated in the study group, others have expressed an interest, and teachers are wishing for more depth in the discussion of the topics" (p. 5). From this process, Fishbaugh and Hecimovic challenge others to meet in collaborative efforts for discussion and change; and "even if teachers never implement the practices which they investigate and discuss, the professional dialogue itself re-energizes" (p. 6).

Another example of a teacher study group was summarized by Sanacore. This Massachusetts group formed in order to resolve discontentment with standardized assessment. The group began their exploration in one direction but soon changed their focus to "informal assessment as they read related journal articles, monographs, and books" (1993, p. 6). The group met for two hours after school twice each month to share their observations and analyses of classroom performance. As "the study group became empowered with kid-watching strategies, the members continued reading about and discussing informal assessment" (p. 7).

Staff development groups. According to Short and colleagues, "teachers and principals need to be at the center of their own learning" (1993, p. 2). They used teacher study groups as a means of alternative professional development in the Tucson Unified School District. The groups met after school for 90 minutes twice each month.

> The study groups sessions usually began with a short sharing time during which we engaged in social conversations and shared classroom experiences. We then moved into discussing our focus for that session. At the end of each session we would make a decision on what we wanted to discuss the next time and whether to do some type of professional reading or classroom experience before our next meeting to prepare for that discussion. (p. 3)

Murphy described a major purpose of teacher study groups in the Richmond County Public Schools of Augusta, Georgia, as "studying how to make the school better" (1992, p. 71). She believes that "organizing entire faculties into study teams to bring about school improvement is unusual" (p. 71). However, the process worked in Richmond County. In this situation, teacher study groups were a major portion of a training and support effort in which teacher participation was mandatory. Meeting times were scheduled during planning periods, special release times, and before or after school, as decided within each school. Individual groups were composed of six or fewer members with rotating leadership, and a log was kept of each meeting. The topics discussed were chosen by the groups

themselves, and the groups' results were subject only to self-evaluation.

Administrators' study groups. A study group of a slightly different type was highlighted by Radencich (1993). The voluntary "networking study group" for elementary principals and their assistants and secondary principals and their assistants attracted teachers as resource persons. Originally the sessions were scheduled for four mornings during a three-month period. Discussions centered on selected readings, and various forms of writing were incorporated in the process. The writing consisted of response logs or journals. The group members noted that some strong benefits of this process were bonding between members, the sharing of professional articles and books, "ripple effects" of providing other school personnel with information, and the spawning of new study groups from the original group. This group also found it valuable to spend the first 20 or 30 minutes of each session reviewing pertinent journal articles under the leadership of a group member.

Computer-connected groups. Electronic networking has started to broaden the reach of teacher study groups. Sanacore (1993) outlined some of the information breakthroughs that are resulting from practitioners and researchers collaborating through the School Renewal Network. Ten topics with subtopics are available with "dialogue strands concerning ideas, problems, and issues. The use of appropriate software reduces phone costs and permits individuals to transmit with ease at any time during the day or night" (p. 10).

As a member of the writing team of this teacher study group, one of us (Cindy Wilson) explored the effectiveness of electronic networking in teacher study groups by searching some of the computer chat rooms available in the education department of America Online. In the Teachers' Information Network, the Teachers' Forum provides for online discussions through the "Conference Halls," "Express Yourself," and "Afterwords" areas. Wilson was able to contact several members of teacher study groups throughout the country in an effort to expand our group's understanding of the intricacies of teacher study groups. The topic, "teacher study group," under the "Express Yourself" area was created by Wilson to discover the feasibility of developing teacher study groups through computer systems. The initial results are quite positive, and there is good promise for future applications.

Teacher-initiated student study groups. The teacher study group concept lends itself to classroom use with a few modifications. Another of us (Genny Cramer) has been using the teacher study group format in her graduate reading courses at Southwest Missouri State University for four years. The structure used in her classes was modeled after suggestions given by Pierce (1992).

In introducing the concept of study groups, she asked class members to brainstorm topics they wanted to pursue while one student wrote the topics on the board. Students then selected one of the topics and formed study groups, with each group having from two to six members.

In an attempt to capture the approximate structure of an authentic collaborative learning group, the student members were given as much autonomy as possible within the class setting. They could ask any questions about the topic and conduct research in whatever ways they considered most productive. The method of presentation — handouts, projects, or reports — could be selected by the group members.

Teachers in elementary and high school settings might introduce their students to such study groups using a similar process. Students of all ages can benefit from being able to select their own study topics, choose the questions they want to pursue, find resources, share in the planning and carrying out of research and experimentation, and conduct self-evaluations when they complete the project.

Teacher study groups outside the school setting. The philosophy of teacher study groups is easily adapted for groups of teachers who wish to gather outside the school setting. One of us (Beth Hurst) formed what was originally intended to be a reading group, but it grew into a collaborative learning group when the three teacher members found that they were applying their readings to their classroom practices. In fact, they took personal matters and applied them to their teaching situations and took educational ideas and applied them to personal issues. This teacher study group found that their personal growth affected their teaching and vice versa, which reinforced the notion of Watson and Stevenson (1989) that professional and personal change are inseparable.

What We Have Learned

In our teacher study group experiences and through our reading about other educators' uses of study groups, we have found that the applications and advantages of such groups are unlimited. Certainly study groups can enable independent and cooperative learning for teachers. But we also have identified some cautions and considerations that must be taken into account.

Benefits

Teacher study groups are great places for teachers to discover and build on one another's strengths.

- Study groups offer individuals opportunities to pursue personal, professional learning agendas while receiving support and encouragement from others.
- Study groups embody a whole-person philosophy of professional development as opposed to traditional, isolated inservice approaches.
- Study groups are "safe places" to think aloud and to process new information.

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- Study groups increase teacher motivation and generate excitement about personal learning.
- Study groups reduce teachers' feelings of isolation and build professional networks.
- Study groups help teachers learn more than they would if they studied in isolation — the sum is greater than the parts.
- Study groups support change and facilitate the application of new knowledge to classroom practice.
- Study groups encourage combining theory, research, and instruction.

According to Matlin and Short, "for the teachers, the study group is an opportunity to think through their own beliefs, share ideas, challenge current instructional practices, blend theory and practice, identify professional and personal needs — as well as develop literacy innovation for their classrooms" (1991, p. 68). Teacher study groups provide a means for teachers to focus on their own growth and learning.

Cautions and Considerations

At the same time, some cautions and considerations need to be kept in mind when developing study groups.

- Group members need to have autonomy over their learning, and groups should be formed by voluntary association.
- Group members need to make a commitment to the study group process.

- Group members need to treat each other as equals and to build trust and respect within the group.
- Study groups need to be attuned to individual members' needs and facilitate each member's personal goal-setting, but each member must be responsible for meeting his or her own goals.
- Study groups need to set group goals and to reaffirm or adjust them at each group meeting.
- Study groups that maintain formal minutes and keep other records need to devise a system for sharing roles and responsibilities fairly.

Successful study groups are grounded in the principles of collaboration. The teachers who participate in them must understand that the group meeting is not a venue for venting, but rather a forum for communication about change and professional growth. Teacher study groups that are well-structured can effectively help teachers to discover new professional understandings and to enhance their feelings of personal achievement.

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